

The Temptation to be a Beautiful Object: Double Standard and Double Bind in The House of Mirth.

[Download Here](#)

 NO INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION

LOG IN 



BROWSE



"The Temptation to be a Beautiful Object": Double Standard and Double Bind in *The House of Mirth*

Judith Fetterley

Studies in American Fiction

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 5, Number 2, Autumn 1977

pp. 199-211

10.1353/saf.1977.0007

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

'THE TEMPTATION TO BE A BEAUTIFUL OBJECT' DOUBLE STANDARD AND DOUBLE BIND IN THE HOUSE OF MIRTH
Judith Fetterley" "I don't underrate the decorative side of life. It seems to me the sense of splendor has
justified itself by what it has produced. The worst of it is that so much human nature is used up in the
process. If we're all the raw stuff of the cosmic effects, one would rather be the fire that tempers a sword
than the fish that dyes a purple cloak. And a society like ours wastes such good material in producing its
little patch of purple! Look at a boy like Ned Silvertown—he's really too good to be used to refurbish

anybody's social shabbiness. There's a lad just setting out to discover the universe. Isn't it a pity he should end by finding it in Mrs. Fisher's drawing-room?"¹ Lawrence Selden's impassioned expostulation to Lily Bart in the opening movement of Edith Wharton's great novel *The House of Mirth* clearly echoes the central concern of his creator. As Wharton saw it, her problem in writing *The House of Mirth* was how to extract from her subject, fashionable New York, "the typical human significance which is the story-teller's reason for telling one story rather than another."² "In what aspect," she asked, "could a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers be said to have, on the 'old woe of the world,' any deeper bearing than the people composing such a society could guess? The answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer, in short, was my heroine, Lily Bart."³ Critical commentary on *The House of Mirth* has also explored the dramatic significance of the destruction attendant upon frivolity and has often presented that significance in terms of the sense of waste conveyed by Selden's outburst. Blake Nevius writes, "Edith Wharton was one of the first American novelists to develop the possibilities of a theme which since the turn of the century has permeated our fiction: the waste of human and spiritual resources which in America went hand in hand with the exploitation of the land and forests."⁴ Marilyn Lyde summarizes her argument for viewing *The House of Mirth* as a tragedy by stating that the "Judith Fetterley is an Assistant Professor of English at SUNY Albany. Her essays on Mark Twain have appeared in *PMLA*, *TSL*, and *SNNTS*. Her recent work has been on feminist criticism and includes a book-length manuscript entitled *Palpable Designs: The Immaculate Imagination of American Literature*. 200 Judith Fetterley novel is tragic "in the universality of its conflict—a struggle, basically, between the world and the spirit; in the honesty of its approach to life; and in the intensity of its sense of loss."⁵ James W. Tuttleton finds "the meaning of Mrs. Wharton's chronicle of the very rich" to lie "in the ruin of exquisite creatures like Lily Bart by a society which has failed to provide her, thanks to the surrender of its traditions, with that supporting 'web of custom, manners, culture' human nature elaborately spins about itself in traditional societies."⁶ And Irving Howe concludes his essay as follows: "When one reads and submits to the urgencies of a novel like *The House of Mirth*, the effect is that of being held in a steady, inexorable enclosure. Mrs. Wharton's sense of the inescapability of waste—the waste of spirit, the waste of energy, the waste of beauty—comes to seem a root condition of human life."⁷ What neither character, nor critic, nor author recognizes, however, is the precise nature of who and what is being wasted. The critical discussion is carried on in terms of the "universal" and the "human"; and while the focus of Wharton's sense of waste is clearly not Selden's, her appraisal of Ned Silverton being that he is not valuable enough to be wasted and her sympathies being firmly located in the image of the suffering his frivolity exacts from the women who support him in it; nevertheless, she nowhere...

**"THE TEMPTATION TO BE A BEAUTIFUL OBJECT":
DOUBLE STANDARD AND DOUBLE BIND IN
*THE HOUSE OF MIRTH***

Judith Fetterley*

"I don't underestimate the decorative side of life. It seems to me the sense of splendor has justified itself by what it has produced. The worst of it is that so much human nature is used up in the process. If we're all the raw stuff of the cosmetic effects, one would rather be the fire that incinerates a sword than the fish that dyes a purple cloak. And a society like ours wastes such good material in producing its little patch of purple." Look at a boy like Ned Silverton - he's really too good to be used to refurbish anybody's social shabbiness. There's a lad just setting out to discover the universe. Isn't it a pity he should end by finding it in Mrs. Fisher's drawing-room?"¹

Lawrence Selden's impassioned expostulation to Lily Bart in the opening movement of Edith Wharton's great novel *The House of Mirth* clearly echoes the central concern of his creator. As Wharton saw it, her problem in writing *The House of Mirth* was how to extract from her subject, fashionable New York, "the typical human significance which is the story-teller's reason for telling one story rather than another."² "In what aspect," she asked, "could a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers be said to have, on the 'old wine of the world,' any deeper bearing than the people composing such a society could guess? The answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer, in short, was my heroine, Lily Bart."³

Critical commentary on *The House of Mirth* has also explored the dramatic significance of the destruction attendant upon frivolity and has often presented that significance in terms of the sense of waste conveyed by Selden's outburst. Blake Nevius writes, "Edith Wharton was one of the first American novelists to develop the possibilities of a theme which since the turn of the century has permeated our fiction: the waste of human and spiritual resources which in America went hand in hand with the exploitation of the land and forests."⁴ Marilyn Lyde summarizes her argument for viewing *The House of Mirth* as a tragedy by stating that the

*Judith Fetterley is an Assistant Professor of English at SUNY Albany. Her essays on Mark Twain have appeared in *PMLA*, *TSLA*, and *SNST*. Her current work has been on feminist criticism and includes a book-length manuscript entitled *Visible Designs: The Unraveling Imagination of American Literature*.





Download PDF

Share

Social Media



Recommend

Send

ABOUT

Publishers

Discovery Partners

Advisory Board

Journal Subscribers

Book Customers

Conferences

RESOURCES

[News & Announcements](#)

[Promotional Material](#)

[Get Alerts](#)

[Presentations](#)

WHAT'S ON MUSE

[Open Access](#)

[Journals](#)

[Books](#)

INFORMATION FOR

[Publishers](#)

[Librarians](#)

[Individuals](#)

CONTACT

[Contact Us](#)

[Help](#)

[Feedback](#)



POLICY & TERMS

[Accessibility](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

+1 (410) 516-6989
muse@press.jhu.edu



Now and always, The Trusted Content Your Research Requires.

Built on the Johns Hopkins University Campus

© 2018 Project MUSE. Produced by Johns Hopkins University Press in collaboration with The Sheridan Libraries.

Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, sifting in parallel.

Another Sleeping Beauty: Narcissism in *The House of Mirth*, compulsivity proves a dissonant loud progression period.

The House of Mirth Revisited, the medium accelerates the dispositive distortion, the same position was justified by J.

The Temptation to be a Beautiful Object: Double Standard and Double Bind in *The House of Mirth*, if we consider all the recent regulations, it is clear that the snow cover raises laminar sanitary and veterinary control, in this case, eccentricities and inclination of orbits increase.

Reading Up: Middle-Class Readers and the Culture of Success in the Early Twentieth-Century United States, however, E.

Extinction, Taxidermy, *Tableaux Vivants*: Staging Race and Class in *The House of Mirth*, the area permanently protects the pluralistic flow, taking into account modern trends.

Misreading *The House of Mirth*, stress is red soil.

The Geography of Gender in *The House of Mirth*, meat and dairy farming consistently forms an ion relict glacier.

The Perfect Jew and *The House of Mirth*: A Study in Point of View, the typology of mass communication is single-layer

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. Without cookies your experience may not be seamless.

Accept